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## THE POSSIBILITIES OF THE SHORT STORY

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In one of the "Tales of the Innocence of Father Brown," that most charming of detectives remarks that the thing we human beings are most likely to overlook is the object which stares us in the face. This paradoxical blindness of the ordinary mind is similarly girded at in Poe's "Purloined Letter," wherein the astute minister, anxious, you remember, to conceal his pilfered letter past all possibility of discovery, displays it boldly in a rack, so that it strikes the eye of the visitor, immediately as he enters the room. The idea, though expressed in new terms and picturesque setting, was doubtless born with Adam. Man early became so accustomed to the sky that he remembers it only when it is hidden.

Shall we be astonished, then, to find that in the schools some things which are near and all about, are in consequence out of the range of mental vision? We want to study, let us say, English literature. Naturally we must be acquainted with the deeds of Beowulf, we must study translations of the Homeric poems, we must not forget the fulminating arguments of Areopagitica. Then, if time be left, say you, on to Ralph Roister Doister; for is not that the first English comedy?

We are all the while surrounded by a growing literature of extraordinary complexity and brilliance; writer after writer whom we know and admire, is producing pictures of the life of our day that stamp themselves indelibly on our

consciousness; the multifarious, endlessly-moving, highly-colored present is being transmitted into permanent coin of the realm of letters; yet to how many of us is this currency actually current in the daily work of the classroom? We are amused, fascinated, inspired by W. W. Jacobs and H. G. Wells, by Stevenson and a host of others; but once we begin to teach Literature (with a capital) we lose memory of that delight.

I should be the last to deprecate the loving study of Shakespeare and Homer and the great names of the past. We need more, not less, of the greatest. But because teachers (in this respect, at least) are virtuous, "shall there be no more cakes and ale?" Is the magic of the older literature so prepotent that it awes us into complete neglect of the fresh, warm vitality of today? Unquestionably, the main body of literature placed before the pupils should be drawn from those books which have passed through the fiery furnace of criticism and of time. It seems, however, the part of a senile *laudator temporis acti* to require that a book be written half a century ago, before it is furnished with a certificate of admission to the schools.

At present, the short story is the only form not fairly represented in the secondary school reading course. The recommendations of the College Entrance Requirements Board are, and in the nature of the case, always will be open to question on the point of wisdom of selection; scarcely any one, however, will deny that excepting the short story, the various literary types available for school reading, are adequately represented. For the epic we find translations of the Iliad and the Odyssey; for narrative poetry there are Chaucer, Spenser, Dryden, Coleridge, Scott, Tennyson, and Browning; the lyric can be studied from Milton, Burns, and, more particularly, from the "Golden Treasury;" for the novel there is an especially fine selection ranging from Defoe to Stevenson; the essay, the oration, the argument can all be well taught with the material at hand. Only the Benjamin of literature is treated as a stepson by the novercal prescribers for youth.

No accusation is brought, of total neglect. Hawthorne and Poe are frequently read; some daring spirits among teachers go so far even, as to read a modern short story occasionally to the class. Yet Poe, in spite of a brilliant technique, and Hawthorne, for all his splendid symbolism and grim preoccupation with moral issues, are, neither the one nor the other, characteristic exemplars of the modern



writer of short stories. For the short story type, rooted though it be in the mystic tales of India, and exemplified time and again in the *contes dévotés* and *fabliaux* of the Middle Ages, has come only within the last half century to the full flower of perfection. Hawthorne and Poe wrote, to be sure, stories that in their way, are yet to be surpassed; they indicated to alert successors the path to follow; but they cannot be said adequately to represent the field in which Harte, Stevenson, Kipling, and Morrison produced their finest work.

The query is raised, "What is the short story?" Is it simply an abbreviated tale? Brander Matthews was one of the first to point out definitely the insecurity of such an hypothesis. In his opinion, a short story, as distinguished from the amplified anecdote, the brief tale, or the novel, results from the logical development of a simple situation in such a way as to produce on the reader a peculiar unity of impression. The qualities of ingenuity, compression and originality, he finds indispensable to the short story writer. H. G. Wells, on the other hand, not long ago defined the short story "as the jolly art of making something very bright and moving; it may be horrible or pathetic or funny or beautiful or profoundly illuminating, having only this essential, that it should take from fifteen to fifty minutes to read aloud." This definition is infinitely more popular than Brander Matthews' but upon analysis it will be found to mean the same thing. In other words, the short story is no disjointed summary, capable of extension into romance or novel; the incidents therein narrated must be welded into a single situation so that there emerges at the end the same impression of unity and concentration that we have in looking at Rembrandt's "Philosophe au Livre Ouvert."

Accepting this definition of the short story, we perceive clearly enough that the study of the novel does not exhaust the possibilities of prose narrative, and we may begin to see "as in a glass darkly" that perhaps an extended use of the short story may accomplish results in the school difficult to attain by means of the novel.

In the first place, the short story might serve to bridge the chasm that yawns between the work of the elementary and the work of the secondary school. The methods of teaching English literature in high school, whether better or worse, are very different from the methods of grammar school. The lessons assigned are longer, the books read are more difficult, the study is more analytic and (last

straw) the pupil is left much more to his own devices. The student entering high school, woefully immature, usually ignorant, past belief, of books and how to approach books, is forthwith confronted with "The Lady of the Lake" or "Ivanhoe" or the like. In the majority of instances, his previous reading has been confined to the newspaper, the cheap magazine, and the so-called boys' books, wherein the mental food afforded is minutely ground and thinly spread.

To us who are used to constant reading, "The Lady of the Lake" is monotonously simple; to the ordinary boy, it is a terrible mountain to climb—so lofty a peak that without genuine sympathy on the part of the teacher he is likely to be sadly winded before he reaches the summit of understanding. With "Ivanhoe" and "The Last of the Mohicans," the difficulty is of course less; but the task of grasping either story as a whole is to most boys and girls arduous in the extreme.

The consequence of beginning the English course with a difficult book is obvious. Encountering obstacles that baffle him at the outset, the pupil begins by being satisfied with half-prepared lessons and gradually comes to conceive a hearty dislike for that portion of the curriculum which ought to be the most pleasant as well as the most profitable. It is, after all, a question of simple psychology. If the initial steps of the pupil's work in English are surrounded with associations of pleasure and success, a powerful momentum is thereby set up which will bid fair to carry him over the rougher places.

A group of a dozen short stories could easily be selected from the works of such men as Harte, Stockton, Bunner, Morrison, Kipling, Chesterton, and Merrick (to mention only a few names) that would splendidly satisfy the double requirement of literary distinction and genuine appropriateness for the beginning of the first year in high school. Though I am not of the opinion of those who would strew the path of learning with American Beauty roses, and who exalt interest to such a pitch that they dare not present a difficult or dry subject for fear of boring their delicate charges; nevertheless, I do firmly believe that enthusiasm on the part of the pupil for his work is half the battle gained. To arouse such initial enthusiasm, no type of literature is more apt than the judiciously selected short story: for it is rapid, direct, vivid, and brief enough so that the lightly swerving attention of the young pupil is neither tempted to stray nor lulled to sleep.



Besides acting as a sort of stimulant at a critical stage of the student's progress, the short story may be used with extraordinary success in teaching the principles of composition. Teaching students to repeat glibly the definition of Unity is child's play; teaching them to comprehend the meaning of Unity, to grasp its utter necessity and to apply its principles to their own work, is a task before which a pedagogic Hercules might quail. For this purpose, the novel is practically out of count, because the novelist is allowed and usually takes a large liberty; the greatest English novelists, in particular, have refused to be hemmed in by restrictions of conventional Unity. A poem is likewise inexpedient on account of other more urgent matters that call for attention. The short story, on the other hand, is nothing, if not a complete, self-sufficing unit. At every turn, the author must keep in mind the central situation. Everything that does not help in developing the situation must be sternly sacrificed. Accordingly, the short story by reason of the first law of its nature (as the philosopher would say) is preeminently qualified to serve as a clear model of Unity.

For the practical elucidation of the principles of narrative composition, the short story is not merely helpful; it is indispensable. Without using individual short stories as examples, I do not see how the salient characteristics of good narrative can be made clear to pupils who find it easy to memorize words but who need to be goaded into searching for the ideas that lie within words. If one is engaged in showing the importance of "point of view", what is better than to read Kipling's "Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes;" if the aim is to emphasize the value of "surprise," where can be found better material than O. Henry's "Hiding of Black Bill?" The meaning of "suspense," "clever dialogue," "rapid development," "atmosphere" can be likewise manifested more concretely and intelligently by the study of short stories than by any other method. Undoubtedly most teachers make liberal use of short stories for this purpose, but they are hampered by the difficulty of putting an adequate collection of illustrative examples actually in the hands of the pupils.

Again, the short story is admirably adapted for practise in reading aloud in the class-room. The vigor of the short story, the compact style, the abundance of dialogue, the colloquial flow of sentences, all aid in piquing and maintaining the interest of the pupils and in furnishing a much

more varied test of power than the reading of an ordinary essay or poem. With what naive delight, for example, would pupils read one of Jacob's sailor stories; with what apathy they drone out "The House of Seven Gables" or even "The Idylls of the King."

Occasionally, too, it is a good plan for the teacher to read aloud a bright, humorous tale. After a strenuous month of grammar drill, for instance, the reading of Myra Kelley's "Games in Gardens" will have the same effect on the flagging spirits of the class, that the first deep breath of keen air produces on the body after it has been for hours confined in a stuffy schoolroom. It clarifies the atmosphere, it renews the outwearied eagerness to work, it chases away the deadly shadow of stagnation. If the objection come from the serried ranks of petrified conservatism that such an interlude constitutes a waste of time, the retort courteous is at hand. The reading aloud by the teacher of a short story is not only worth while in itself, but it also, by quickening the mental pulse, averts that fatal torpor which repeated drill is always in danger of producing.

The short story can also be made to contribute to the fulfilment of the highest responsibilities of the teacher. The power of suggestion, exerted, often unconsciously on either side, by the teacher's attitude towards life, is without shadow of doubt, the most pervasive and effective element of teaching. Obviously, the carping critic is worse than useless; the sermonmonger is a trial and a tribulation to youth. Yet though the finest influences of teaching, from the standpoint of character development, are the most elusive and incalculable—flowing as they do from those subtle forces called personality and example—nevertheless, the tactful teacher is able in several ways to point his work deliberately in the direction of moral training. To this end many of the world's greatest short stories seem specially created.

Every man and woman comes sooner or later, to perceive the fearful tenacity of a habit once formed. Talking about this subject has an unfortunate fascination for the teacher with a smattering of psychology; but such prattle usually defeats its own purpose, because the child as yet lacks corroborative experience. If, however, you would have the pupil feel this terrible power, read some day to the class "Markheim," Stevenson's extraordinary study of good overwhelmed and all but destroyed by the slow growth of evil tendencies into vicious habits of life.



Again, if you would fill the hearts of your pupils with the feeling of universal kinship—a lesson nowhere so necessary as today in America—read them Oscar Wilde's "Young King." Here a poignant picture is painted, of social inequality and of widespread oppression, and withal in prose so exquisitely melodious, that as we listen we feel the same vague pain that solemn music always inspires. If, then, you would stir their souls by the example of a noble unselfishness, read Kipling's "William the Conqueror" or Harte's "Outcasts of Poker Flat," or, indeed, any one of a score of stories that rush to one's mind.

Finally, a certain amount of study in short story type is imperatively necessary, if we are to create a standard of criticism, which means, practically, if we are to direct the reading of our pupils in the proper channels. Numerous though the good short stories be, yet a hundred fold greater in number are the indifferent and the positively bad. The frothy and the morbid, the flippant, the sensual, and the absurdly melodramatic abound among the short stories of the cheaper magazines of this country. If some are innocuous, there is a great deal that is directly injurious to the good taste, the manners and the morals of young people.

Our pupils are going to read short stories, just as they are going to read the current novels. We attempt to lead them to an appreciation of the standard novels, hoping that if we are able to induce them to enjoy Scott and Thackeray and Dickens, they will not remain satisfied with the highly spiced pot-boilers which swarm in the market today, as sparrows to the attack of a lone robin. In like manner, ought we not raise a standard for the short story? For we may be certain that no one who can tingle to the racy tales of Kipling, or who can feel the delicate humor of Leonard Merrick, will be content to stultify himself with the insipid and vulgar makeshifts that pass current in the cheaper magazines.

In conclusion, we may summarize briefly the contention of this paper. The short story, long recognized as a separate type of fiction, should be given a valid and dignified place in the reading course of our secondary schools. The other types of literature should be studied just as thoroughly as heretofore; in addition the short story should receive its due credit, not as a minor and rather negligible offshoot of the novel but as a distinct and living type—a type, moreover, which has a special fitness for the work of the secondary school English course.

Let us, at least, belong to our age.

## A CONTRIBUTION.

Conventional sentence study may sometimes be varied by a thorough-going exercise in translation. A dozen detached French or Latin sentences on the board; a vocabulary composed impromptu by the combined wit of the class; synonyms for the literal translations of words written in lists to choose from later; a little brisk discussion of the most effective arrangement of each sentence for English readers, all this may fill twenty minutes of the period when the work is being assigned. Then, with this stimulus for his preparation, each student should present next day his most exquisite English renderings for the foreign passages. He should be ready to defend his work of art and his choice of certain phrases in preference to those chosen by others in the class. In such an argumentative comparing of work, no jerry-built sentences can stand. The exercise is a distinct help in showing the value of sentence form and developing an appreciation of style.

The teacher can use this opportunity to make the process of translating appear like the high and holy art that it is. Nothing shows a class the magic of the right phrase more directly than the reading of both good and bad translations of familiar poems. For instance, a class that has read Burns's "To a Daisy" will feel at once the horror of a certain French translator's version of the "Wee, modest, crimson-tippèd flow'r". Here are two lines of the translation. The title is written, "A une Marguerite, tombée sous ma charrue en Avril".

"Modeste petite fleur bordée de rouge,  
Tu m'as rencontré dans une heure fatale."

The transformed air of the *modeste Marguerite tombée*, and all the rest of the pompous wording, will reveal at once the similar distress that Frenchmen would feel on reading the usual undergraduate translation of French literature.

For this sort of exercise, French proverbs, brief German poems, Latin epigrams and sentences from *De Amicitia* are best. And after a bit of this drill, the modern language department and the Latin masters should be asked to watch for results.



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